

FORGIVENESS

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[Matt. 18:21-35](#)

Several years ago, my wife and I learned that a couple related to us had separated and would most likely get divorced. The husband apparently committed an adulterous offense that the wife could not bring herself to forgive. In fact, she was so repulsed by his actions that she could barely stand to be in his presence for very long.

Please understand that I am not writing this to judge or condemn either of these great people. We love both of them. We prayed that God would perform a miracle of reconciliation in their lives. We prayed God would first restore them in their relationship to each other and to effective service in the ministry of the church.



Today, however, they are divorced. The husband remarried. The wife we lost touch with following the divorce. However, throughout their separation and their divorce and possibly even up until today, forgiveness was never even on this wife's list of response options.

Murder, maybe, but not forgiveness.

As sad as such stories are, real-life events like this often bring the things of God into sharp focus. This event turned my mind toward the meaning of forgiveness and its place in the life of Christians.

First, consider this wife's reaction to her husband's breach of trust. Then evaluate the entire event in the context of eternity.

As I said earlier, this husband's behavior had so offended his wife that she could not tolerate even being in his presence. Her only solution was separation. The husband made several attempts to reconcile with the wife, but she could not bring herself to even consider it.

Now multiply that wife's feelings of revulsion by infinity.

When we do, we begin to draw a bit nearer to understanding the infinite depth of destruction that befell Adam, and all creation, when he chose to sin against an infinite, eternal, holy and righteous God.

Because of Adam's rebellion, a vast gulf opened separating the realm of man from the righteousness of God. No matter how many times or by how many means Adam might have

attempted reconciliation, he would never be able to convince a righteous God to grant forgiveness by his own devices or in his own power.

The remarkable difference between these two stories is that God places forgiveness at the top of His list of responses!

In fact, God put the plan of redemption – which includes the forgiveness of sin – in place before He ever created Adam.

*2 Tim. 1:9-10 God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus **before the ages began**, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

God is omnipotent – He knows all things – past, present, and future. This means that God planned to forgive Adam even before He created and before Adam sinned.

Adam was God’s creation – an integral part of His eternal plan – “for better or for worse.”

If we planned our marriages based on the same premise, maybe spouses would respond to the indiscretions of their mates in a very different manner.

If each future partner would determine in his and her own heart that they would submit to the concept of redemption and forgiveness before they ever agree to the creation of a marriage, then the likelihood of a failure in the relationship would hopefully significantly diminish.

If members of a church would commit to the concept of redemption as God designed it, even though they may be repulsed or angered by the offenses of other members, maybe they would not be so hasty to argue or to separate when conflicts arose.

If we truly understood God’s concept of redemption and forgiveness, in both marriage, in church relations, and in human relations, even if we were repulsed by the other person’s actions, maybe we would not be driven to separate from them but would be drawn toward them, willing to make a sacrificial effort toward reconciliation.

In this article, I want to make seven points about forgiveness.

1. Forgiveness is hard.

Forgiveness is hard because we are flesh and blood. We are not God.

I am convinced that forgiveness is an attribute that belongs uniquely to God. Only God can do it. There is no other power in the Universe that can forgive. It is that hard. Only He can heal such glaring wounds that tear our hearts and bruise our souls. We are powerless against them.

For us truly to forgive requires our willful submission to God’s authority, allowing Him to work through our hearts and in our efforts. Without the power of God behind them, all of our efforts will never mend a broken heart or restore a violated trust.

Such mending requires the touch of the miraculous – something which is no challenge for God.

For this wife to have forgiven her husband would have required a supernatural intervention of the Holy Spirit empowering her to do what she could never do on her own – something she was unwilling to consider or submit to.

2. Forgiveness hurts.

Here's why: As God designed it, the process of forgiveness must begin *with the one who is offended*.

Yes, the Bible does teach that the process of forgiveness is never fully completed unless there is genuine repentance on the part of the offender.

The Apostle Peter preached, “Repent for the remission of sin...that your sins may be blotted out.” ([Acts 2:38; 3:19](#))

There is no true forgiveness until there is actual repentance, but the *process* of forgiveness begins with the one who is offended. God himself modeled this for us.

***Rom. 5:8** God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners (enemies of God in open rebellion against His person and His purpose), Christ died for us.*

It hurts to take the first step toward reconciliation when you are the one who is offended. Yet we must understand that, in human relations, forgiveness is not something that we do simply for the sake of others, but it is something that we do for ourselves.

Someone said, “Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” The same can be said for being unforgiving.

Forgiveness prevents the bad behavior of another person from destroying your heart. Forgiveness is not just something that we do for others. We do it so that we can get well and move on with our lives.

But it does hurt, and it's seldom easy.

3. Forgiveness costs.

The sin of man was of infinite proportion and thus atonement requires an act of infinite love – better known as grace.

***Eph. 2:8** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

I am sure in her anger this wife probably would like to have killed her unfaithful husband. In fact, God had this same reaction. Adam, and all persons born thereafter, suffered death because of Adam's sin ([Rom. 5:12-21](#)). However, even before He created, God made allowance for even that and appointed the Son to die in our place.

***1 John 4:10** In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us (the idea being that He loved us first) and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

When a man and a woman or a husband and a wife say, "I love you," their commitment should include such an idea as God taught us by His actions:

Eph. 1:7 In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

When we say to each other, "I love you," or when we vow before witnesses "for better or for worse," this should be our confession:

"No matter what happens – even when I am offended and repulsed by your worst behavior – I will make the sacrifice for reconciliation, no matter the cost. My desire for you will always outweigh your transgressions. Should you step back or even step away, my first move will be in your direction. Because I love you, I give to you that which means more to me than anything else in the world – myself."

After all, that is the model God set for us.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son (which means that God gave Himself), that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

4. Forgiveness is not tolerance.

Where there is sin, there must be forgiveness for the sinner, but there must never be tolerance for the sin. We are called to love one another, but we are commanded to abhor sin ([Rom. 12:9](#)).

When a person persists in a sinful practice or condition, those who love them are not obligated to tolerate their sin.

In one of his sermons, John Piper pointed out two things that forgiveness is not. ¹

- Forgiveness is not the absence of anger at sin. It is not feeling good about what was bad.
- Forgiveness is not the absence of serious consequences for sin.

In other words, the person in a marriage relationship that is offended by the other person's infidelity has no obligation to wink at the sin of their spouse or to fear confronting it.

When a church member falls into sin, the church is not obligated to tolerate their sin **or their presence** when that person is unwilling to repent and abandon their sin.

Matt. 18:17 ...if (after a person has been confronted with his sin) he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a non-Jewish person and a tax collector.

In other words, the church, when it has exhausted all means of reconciliation and restoration, has the authority to look upon that person as if he or she were a lost person, in spite of their profession of faith.

Breaking fellowship with someone who persists in sinful behavior or practices is not the same thing as unforgiveness. The person who persists in their sin has already chosen their own separation from others by their participation in the sin.

Sin has consequences. The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death.” In other words, whenever there is sin, something dies – faith, trust, respect, relationships, and sometimes, even people.

5. Forgiveness calls for confrontation.

A person found in sin has no right to argue that no one has the right to confront them about his or her sin. Again, [Matthew 18](#) defies that argument, as does the entire Scripture.

In [Numbers 20](#), when Moses struck the rock in anger instead of speaking to it in obedience to God’s instructions, God judged him publicly and refused to allow Moses to lead the people into the land of promise.

In [2 Samuel 12](#), following David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his conspiracy to have her husband killed in battle, Nathan the prophet confronted David to his face and in public, advising David that his blatant adultery was evidence that David “despised the word of the Lord.”

In [Galatians 2](#), Paul tells how he confronted Peter “to his face” and apparently before witnesses when Peter refused to sit with non-Jewish believers at a meal, pointing out to Peter that his sin did not just affect him, but that he was leading others to practice the same hypocritical behavior.

In [Acts 5](#), Peter confronted Ananias and Sapphira face to face and in front of witnesses when it was proven that they had lied, not only to the church, but to the Holy Spirit.

6. Forgiveness requires restoration.

Now, in light of all that I said in numbers four and five above, I must once again appeal to the mercy and grace that God has demonstrated toward us and to plead with all of us that we deal with one another in that same mercy and grace.

Eph. 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. 5:1 Therefore (in so doing) be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

We must keep in the forefront of our minds that in spite of everything else that may happen, the ultimate goal of everyone involved in conflict – whether in a marital relationship or in the church – is not confrontation, but always restoration.

Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

James 5:19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

7. Forgiveness is obedience.

At the end of Matthew 18, after the master had confronted the unforgiving servant,

Matt. 18:34 ...in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.
35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

John Piper

The reason (we are to forgive) is not because we can earn heaven or merit heaven by forgiving others, but because holding fast to an unforgiving spirit proves that we do not trust Christ. If we trust him, we will not spurn his way of life. If we trust him, we will not be able to take forgiveness from his hand for our million-dollar debt and withhold it from our ten-dollar debtor.²

Charles Spurgeon

To be forgiven is such sweetness that honey is tasteless in comparison with it. But yet there is one thing sweeter still, and that is to forgive. As it is more blessed to give than to receive, so to forgive rises a stage higher in experience than to be forgiven.³

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/as-we-forgive-our-debtors>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons31.xxvi.html>